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SUBJECT: CODEL TANNER VISIT TO CROATIA (FEB 21-24)

REF: ZAGREB 116

¶1. SUMMARY: CODEL Tanner, with six House members from the US delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, had a successful visit to Croatia from Feb. 21 to 24. The CODEL met with both Prime Minister Ivo Sanader and President Stjepan Mesic on Feb. 21. Key topics were Croatia's NATO membership, ISAF deployments, Kosovo (reported reftel), and efforts to combat corruption. In Dubrovnik on Feb. 23-24, the delegation was briefed on post-war reconstruction efforts. END SUMMARY.

¶2. PM Sanader stressed his appreciation for U.S. leadership in Southeast Europe. He said Croatia would warmly welcome a visit by President Bush, if one could be arranged around the time of the NATO Summit in Budapest. Sanader added that Croatia was now, particularly in the context of its own efforts to join NATO and the EU, looking to play a constructive leadership role within the region.

¶3. Sanader assured the CODEL that Croatia would resolve all outstanding issues related to NATO accession. The GoC would approve its supplemental SOFA "very soon." The GoC would also continue its campaign to inform the public that NATO is a "community of values" and not just a military alliance. This campaign had already succeeded in pushing support for NATO over 50 percent, and Sanader said he thought recent instability in the region would remind people of why NATO was a good idea, and that poll numbers would rise toward 65 or 70 percent. He also said he was confident the Croatian parliament would unanimously approve Croatia's NATO entry when the time came. Sanader also stressed that Croatia remained committed to its ISAF deployment, and was looking at how it might be able to take charge of a PRT in 2009. Noting that some UN soldiers had died during peacekeeping operations in SEE in the 1990's, Croatia now had "an obligation to help" bring stability to other parts of the world.

¶4. In its meeting with President Mesic, the CODEL heard again that Croatia is firmly committed to seeking NATO and EU membership. Mesic also expressed confidence that public opinion in favor NATO would remain above 50 percent. In response to a CODEL question on corruption, Mesic acknowledged that it remained a problem for Croatia, particularly in the area of public procurement. He noted, however, that Croatia had created the necessary institutions to help combat corruption, and that a key measure was to ensure transparency. He was confident Croatia would continue to improve its efforts to fight corruption. "We won the battle to establish democracy; we can win the fight against corruption as well."

¶5. In a visit to Dubrovnik on February 23, the delegation met with Nikola Obuljen, who was Dubrovnik's deputy mayor when the city was shelled in the early 1990's and mayor during the reconstruction period. Obuljen told the delegation about his experience negotiating with the Serbs to stop the attacks and then negotiating with international organizations to try to get reconstruction assistance, which was particularly difficult because the war still continued in other parts of the country. In the end, Obuljen said, foreign

assistance paid for 10 to 15 percent of Dubrovnik's reconstruction efforts.

16. CODEL Tanner has reviewed this cable.

BRADTKE